

## *San Antonio Express-News*

### **Area Legal Aid Entities Merge**

**By Analisa Nazareno**

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The letterhead on correspondence still bears the Bexar County Legal Aid name, even though the organization is no longer.

Texas Rural Legal Aid — known for its fearless and sometimes controversial advocacy of the poorest of the poor — last week took over four other corporations serving the legal needs of the indigent in Southwest Texas, including the one in Bexar County.

The new 68-county legal aid organization has yet to be named and stretches from El Paso to Corpus Christi, Harlingen to Austin.

The leader for the super-sized law firm has big plans.

"I'm more interested in looking at what we as advocates can do to address the serious problems of poverty than the number of cases we close," said David Hall, the TRLA executive director.

In the Rio Grande Valley, Hall's attorneys set up separate groups to assist small-business owners and residents with low-interest loans and legal representation. They also operate a legal arm that assists migrant workers from Texas to Kentucky.

Now, Hall said, he wants to make services to the poor more efficient by working with law students who will handle less complicated legal matters, allowing licensed attorneys to take more "high impact" cases to court.

"What we need to do is handle cases as efficiently as we can, leveraging the amount of time of the lawyer that goes in there and maximizing the number of people that they can help at one time," Hall said.

His plan is to place the 110 attorneys on staff in teams working on specialized legal issues.

He wants to expand the law clinic it already has with St. Mary's University Law School to involve students at the University of Texas Law School.

The law students at St. Mary's interview potential clients, assist them with filling out legal documents and answer the telephones for the legal hotline, freeing up TRLA lawyers to handle the complicated cases, Hall said.

By the end of September, Hall said all the attorneys working with the poor in the 68-county area will be placed on the same computer network so they can pass cases to the best available attorneys.

Last year, board members on the former Legal Aid of Central Texas and Bexar County Legal Aid resisted the merger, saying that the mergers were done illegally and without the input of board members. They also argued that Hall's litigious style hampered their ability to garner funds from Congress.

TRLA generated controversy in 1996, when its attorneys challenged the rights of 800 military personnel to vote in Val Verde County elections by absentee ballot after a former Ku Klux Klan member won a county commissioner post.

Brendan Gill, the former executive director of the Bexar County group, said he has since come to see the merger as a positive move for South Texas.

"I always knew there were good points to merging, just as I knew that there were bad points," Gill said. "Now I'm hoping to accentuate the good points and hope that will minimize the bad points."

Gill now heads the newly merged group's elder law team.

Some changes, including eliminating pay differences between attorneys as well as staff support members across the state and technology training, could be two years in the making, Hall said. Another issue is whether to change the name of Texas Rural Legal Aid so that it reflects the territory's diverse landscape.

"Overall, I think the change will be good," said Richard Loza, a San Antonio attorney and the local coordinator for the bargaining unit of the National Organization of Legal Services Workers. "I think that the poor population in the true rural areas will benefit from more attorneys with a wide range of expertise. Someone in Natalia that may not otherwise have access to an attorney for counsel or advice will be able to have that."

Since last year, Hall has been meeting with nonprofit leaders and others who expressed concern that a merger would mean less representation for the poor in their communities.

"I know change can be difficult, but I think we need to give it a chance," said Joyce Coleman, who as director of Family Violence Prevention Services worked with Bexar County Legal Aid to provide legal assistance to women in the Battered Women's Shelter.

"I think it may actually be a good thing for Texas," Coleman said.

"Larger is not always better, but sometimes it can be."